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The competing influences of national identity on the negotiation of ideal worker expectations: insights from the Sri Lankan knowledge work industry

Abstract

How does national identity influence the way individuals respond to the demands of their work? Despite an increasing awareness of the complex interplay between intersecting social identities and work demands, our understanding of how they are influenced by national identity is underdeveloped. This paper presents the accounts of employees from two Sri Lankan knowledge work industries, who were attempting to align work demands associated with ideal worker expectations, with the social demands associated with their national identity. Conceptualizing the empirical setting of Sri Lanka as a collectivist national context, we offer two theoretical contributions. First, by showing how a shared national identity significantly influences divergence from, and conformity to, ideal worker expectations in Sri Lankan organizations, we generalize understandings of individuals' negotiation of ideal worker expectations (Reid, 2015). In doing so we build on and extend the prevailing 'individualistic' assumptions in collectivistic settings. Second, we show how ideal worker expectations enabled individuals to fulfill and refine demands associated with their non-western national identity, contesting assumptions that non-western national identities are challenging or constraining in global organizations. These findings lead us to propose a reciprocal influence between ideal worker expectations in global organizations, and expectations associated with national identities.

Keywords

Ideal workers; Work demands; National identity; Sri Lanka; International HRM

Introduction

Globalized, knowledge intensive organizations often expect their employees to prioritize work over other non-work demands, and be visible and available to clients (Gambles et al., 2006; Green et al., 2008; Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Kreiner et al., 2006; McCann et al., 2008). These expectations are captured in the notion of the ‘ideal worker’, which defines a desirable employee as one who is totally committed to work and always available (Acker, 1990; Bailyn, 2006; Reid, 2015; Williams et al., 2013). The concept of ideal workers perpetuates claims of high status among knowledge intensive organizations, reflected in a high performing workforce (Alvesson, 2001; Chuang et al., 2016; Gotsi et al., 2010). As a result, performance management systems in these organizational contexts rely on working hours and presenteeism as a proxy for measuring organizational commitment, leadership potential, or facilitating career progression (Acker, 1990; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Epstein et al., 1999; Perlow, 1998; Reid, 2015). Expectations related to ideal workers can thus be conceptualized as a form of individual employee regulation.

Problematically, scholars note that negotiating ideal worker expectations can be challenging for individuals, particularly when attempting to align work demands with those demands associated with social identities, such as family, nationality, ethnicity or gender (Bagger et al., 2008; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Essers et al., 2013; Gill and Larson, 2014; Raghuram, 2013). An individual’s sense of identity, or ‘who I am’, is shaped by the complex interplay of multiple, often competing, social identities, situated within the immediate social context (Alvesson, 1994; Brown and Toyoki, 2013; Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Wright et al., 2012).

Existing research has only begun to acknowledge the potential for intersecting social identities to influence individual negotiation of ideal worker expectations (Jack and Lorbiecki, 2007; Tienari et al, 2002; Zhang et al., 2006). As a result, our understanding of how these influences play out in a globalized work context is limited.

This article focuses on how one specific form of social identity, national identity, influences the way employees in globalized knowledge work industries in Sri Lanka negotiate ideal worker expectations. National identity is a dynamic, shared, internalized discursive resource which influences an individual's sense of self, as one feels a sense of belonging to a collective ideal of a 'nation' (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Cillia et al 1999; Tienari et al, 2005; Tiernari et al, 2013). Under conditions of contemporary globalization, the influence of national identity on employee behavior is emerging as an important consideration for global organizations (Herriot and Scott-Jackson, 2002; Reade, 2001). This is particularly evident in non-western contexts, where organizations' attempts to suppress the influence of local identities, and highlight globalization, have resulted in strengthening national sentiment (Pal, 2016). Despite this, the complexities of how national identity influences individuals in globalized work contexts have been relatively understudied, with a few notable exceptions (Aihlon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Das et al. 2008).

The globalized knowledge work industry in Sri Lanka is a particularly revealing setting in which to explore how national identity influences individual responses to ideal worker expectations. First, in this non-western country, we might expect individuals to draw on their national identity in response to perceived western

homogenization of the knowledge work industry (Oza, 2001). Second, as a collectivistic national context (Adya, 2008; Niles, 1998), there might be higher propensity for individuals to identify strongly with a shared social identity (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Smith et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2002) such as national identity, shaping their responses to work demands. However, existing literature conceptualizes responses to ideal worker expectations as an individualistic process, framed by US-centric assumptions, which do not fully consider the potential influence of other social identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Reid 2015). As a result, we know little about how social identities, such as national identity, influence individual negotiation of work demands.

This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study of 30 highly skilled employees from two Sri Lankan IT and financial services firms, which served British and American clients. We explore how respondents drew on their national identity to negotiate ideal worker expectations in their organizations. The paper is structured as follows. First, we outline the literature on ideal workers, highlighting how existing research has only begun to address the influence of social identities, and in particular national identity. We then introduce the empirical setting of our study and explain our methodology. Our findings show how ideal worker expectations were associated with claims of western superiority in Sri Lanka's global knowledge work industry, leading employees to draw on their national identity to both resist and perpetuate these expectations. We make two key contributions. First, we show how a shared social identity significantly influences the way Sri Lankan individuals negotiate ideal worker expectations through conformity or divergence. We develop Reid's (2015) model on the negotiation of ideal worker expectations, adding deeper insight by

considering intersecting social identities in a collectivist, rather than individualistic, national context (Niles, 1998). Our second contribution develops understandings of how national identities may also be negotiated or adapted in global organizations. Showing how ideal worker expectations had a reciprocal influence on the way individuals fulfilled and refined demands associated with their non-western national identity, we contest assumptions that non-western national identities are challenging or constraining in global organizations (Aihlon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Das et al. 2008). In doing so we highlight the potential for a reciprocal influence on individual understandings of national identity, shaped by negotiation of ideal worker expectations in global organizations.

Ideal worker expectations in knowledge intensive organizations

Employees in globalized, knowledge intensive organizations are subject to performance management systems, such as development opportunities, salary and promotion decisions, which rely on long working hours and presenteeism as a proxy for measuring organizational commitment or leadership potential (Epstein et al., 1999; Perlow, 1998; Reid, 2015). Such performance management systems encourage employees to conform to expectations associated with ideal workers, individuals who are totally committed to work and always available (Acker, 1990; Bailyn, 2006; Reid, 2015; Williams et al., 2013). Conversely, divergence from ideal worker expectations often undermines individual career progression, as non-conformers are penalized, either directly or indirectly (Bourne et al., 2011; Watts, 2009).

As Alvesson and Karreman (2007) note, it is not that performance management practices create better employees, but rather indicate to employees what is expected of

an ideal worker in a specific organizational context, thereby normatively regulating their behavior, and encouraging individuals to comply with ideal worker expectations (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Wieland, 2010). Such normative controls arguably instill a sense of organizational commitment amongst employees, as they seek to conform to the expectations associated with ideal workers, subsequently protecting organizational claims of a high performing workforce (Alvesson and Karreman, 2007; Bardon et al, 2015). This is particularly important in knowledge intensive organizations, which rely on employees conforming to ideal worker expectations, or at least giving the perception of conformity to external audiences, to legitimize organizational claims of exclusiveness and buffering against the ambiguous and non-tangible nature of knowledge work (Alvesson, 1994; 2001; Chuang et al., 2016; Gotsi et al., 2010). As a result of conformity to ideal worker expectations, shared understandings of what ‘constitutes’ an ideal worker within an organization are protected and perpetuated, as employees encourage their colleagues to similarly comply with normative regulation (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009).

Significantly however, recent scholarly contributions have questioned the extent to which apparent conformity to ideal worker expectations actually reflects compliance. For instance, Reid (2015) argues that employees in knowledge work organizations in the US felt conflicted due to a disparity between organizational expectations of ideal workers and the type of worker they, as an individual, preferred to be. She proposed that individuals negotiate ideal worker expectations in two ways: ‘passing’, misrepresenting themselves as complying with ideal worker expectations to protect themselves from being penalized due to non-conformity; or ‘revealing’, by

acknowledging to others that they diverge from ideal worker expectations. Passing and revealing behaviors are dependent on the audience, and indicate how individuals may deviate from ideal worker expectations whilst simultaneously communicating to others that they are conforming (Reid, 2015). In other words, individuals may appear to comply with ideal worker expectations, for example by giving the impression of working long hours to avoid being penalized, whilst actually adapting their work to avoid having to work said hours, and subsequently deviating from such expectations.

Extant research into the negotiation of ideal worker expectations is primarily limited to the experiences of individuals within the immediate organizational context (Alvesson, 1994; Brown and Coupland, 2015; Clarke et al., 2009; O' Toole and Grey, 2016; Reid, 2015). This is surprising, given that identity literature highlights how intersecting social identities, such as family, nationality, ethnicity or gender (Bagger et al., 2008; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Essers et al., 2013; Gill and Larson, 2014; Raghuram, 2013), influence individual responses to work demands. However, previous work into the influence of multiple social identities is limited, and is criticized for assuming they can be considered separately from the way individuals negotiate ideal worker expectations (Tienari et al, 2002; Ramarjan and Reid, 2013).

In sum, we know little about *how* various social identities, such as national identity, influence individual responses to work demands (Brown and Lewis, 2011; Clarke et al., 2009; Chuang et al., 2016; Reid, 2015; Tienari et al, 2002), or how work demands may have a reciprocal influence on understandings of social identities. In the following section we outline how, despite an increasing awareness that national identity has complex influences on the social context, our understanding of how

national identity may influence, or be influenced by, individual negotiation of ideal worker expectations in globalized settings is limited (Jack and Lorbiecki, 2007; Zhang et al., 2006).

National identity

National identity is defined as a specific form of social identity, a group of collectively held ideas relating to shared emotional attitudes or behaviors which are discursively produced or reproduced by those who identify as belonging to a 'nation' (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Cillia et al 1999). We do not assume that national identity is static, nor represents a standardized identity for the inhabitants of an entire country, but rather conceptualizes a shared, internalized discursive resource which shapes how individuals make sense of the immediate social context, and their understanding of the 'nation' as a cohesive entity (Tiernari et al, 2013).

National identity is of particular interest when considering ideal worker expectations in global organizations, as scholars have drawn attention to the dominance of US centric assumptions in prevailing understandings of ideal workers (Merilainen, 2008). For instance, Gagnon and Collinson (2014) note that ideal worker stereotypes are primarily English speaking and westernized, whilst Rivera (2012) argues that multinational companies select employees based on cultural similarity and perceived compliance to American notions of ideal workers. Notably, association with western ideals is particularly pronounced in non-western countries such as India, where global organizations often highlight their western orientation to reap greater financial benefits (Das et al. 2008). In these contexts, employees may find their national identity influences the way they respond to work demands, which may be framed as

western (Aihlon-Souday and Kunda, 2003). From this perspective, we might expect national identity to significantly influence the way individuals in global organizations negotiate work demands, including those associated with ideal workers. However, as noted previously, how national identity influences individual negotiation of ideal worker demands in global organizations remains underexplored. Furthermore, existing research neglects to consider how ideal worker expectations may exert a reciprocal influence on the way individuals make sense of their national identity.

Significantly, the influence of national identity might be particularly pronounced in collectivistic contexts (Jack and Lorbiecki, 2007) where individuals are likely to strongly identify with shared social identities (Hofstede, 1980; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Niles, 1998; Smith et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2002). Previous research into collectivist national settings gives a contested picture of the interplay between national identity and work demands. On one hand, individuals in non-western countries may see employment in corporations affiliated to the West as more desirable than local organizations (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Rajahyaksha and Smita, 2004; Srinivas, 2013; Zhang et al., 2006), reducing the potential influence of national identity on individual responses to work demands. On the other hand, conventional expectations associated with non-western national identities may prove constraining for individuals attempting to fulfill ideal worker demands. For example, in many non-western nationalities women are expected to prioritise family and community life above career (Wijayatilake, 2001), making it challenging for female employees in these contexts to comply with ideal worker expectations. Alternatively, from a more agentic perspective, individuals may draw on national identity to challenge perceived Western homogenization, triggering resistance to ideal worker

demands (Pal, 2016). This is in stark contrast to western national contexts, such as the Scandinavian countries (Meriläinen et al., 2008; Tienari et al., 2005), or the US, France and England (Calori et al., 1994) where it is assumed that national identity has little influence on employee compliance with performance demands.

Given that we are increasingly witnessing the growth of strong nationalist sentiments as a form of resistance to the homogenizing impact of Western culture in many non-western nations (Oza, 2001), it becomes particularly important to understand how national identity may influence compliance with, or resistance to, ideal worker expectations framed by assumptions of western superiority. In this article, we aim to provide new insights into this complex area by exploring how national identity influences the way employees in two global knowledge intensive organizations in Sri Lanka negotiate ideal worker expectations.

Empirical Context

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic country with a population of around 20 million people. Scholars describe Sri Lanka as a collectivistic nation characterized by close bonds between mother and children, extended family members and local communities (Niles, 1998). Women are identified in terms of motherhood and nurturing, and are expected to maintain social bonds and pass on collective values to future generations (Wijayatilake, 2001). Men, in contrast, are expected to fulfill roles as breadwinners. The country is primarily of Sinhalese ethnicity, a Buddhist population, with minority groups comprising the Tamils, Muslims and Burghers. A British colony from 1815 to 1948, and dominated by European counties such as the Portuguese and Dutch prior to this, Sri Lanka's national identity has been shaped by colonial influence. As a British

colony, support for Christian ministries from the British government led to the marginalization of the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, in favour of the Tamils and others who embraced Christianity (Sowell, 2004).

Modern understandings of the ‘Sri Lankan’ national identity have developed since the country gained independence in 1948, and are primarily shaped by the Sinhalese ethnic group. In 1956, Sinhalese became the official language of the country, with the Sinhalese dominated government keen to reclaim their traditional roots from before colonial rule. The increasing emphasis on a Sinhalese national identity led to civil war in Sri Lanka, as the marginalized Tamils formed a rebel group known as the LTTE, beginning with gruesome ethnic riots in 1983. Lasting for three decades, ending on 18th May 2009, the success of the Sri Lankan government in the civil war further cemented a distinct national identity within Sri Lankan citizens. Over the course of the civil war, the government was accused by superpowers in the West of war crimes, and embargoes were placed on the country. Consequently, anti-western sentiments grew, with popular social media depicting Britain and America as hypocritical nations, citing their uninvestigated war crimes in the Middle East (Tirimanna, 2016). Perceived Western homogenizing neo-imperialism remains a significant element in the Sri Lankan context, and continues to shape public discourse (Ondaatjie, 2014).

Despite reservations about the dominance of western influences within Sri Lanka, the country’s leaders also acknowledge the need to keep pace, and compete with the ‘modern’ western world. An eminent linguistics professor in Sri Lanka notes an interesting distinction between modernization and westernization, highlighting the country’s readiness to embrace the former while rejecting the latter (Dharmadasa,

1992; Durham, 2015). Modernization is associated with the concepts such as 'progress' and 'development,' while westernization is associated with homogeneity with those countries that hold dominant positions in the global economy, challenging Sri Lankan national identity. Although westernization is resisted, Sri Lanka fully intends to modernize and develop its economy by serving the global market. The largest industries within the country include tourism, export driven manufacturing, and more recently the outsourcing industry (Athukorala and Jayasuriya, 2012). Building on the country's high literacy rates (92.8% for males and 90% for females) (Labour force survey, 2013) and skill sets in Information technology and Accounting, the present government hopes to make Sri Lanka a global knowledge hub (Hirimburegama, 2012).

There is very little scholarly work on ideal worker expectations in the Sri Lankan context. However, the national context has many similarities with India, as the outsourcing industry, in particular for information technology companies, has been increasing in both countries. Employment for Sri Lankan and Indian nationals in global companies affiliated to the West is seen as desirable, due to high pay structures and the ability to work in organizational environments which are perceived as modern (Fernando and Cohen, 2013; Rajahyaksha and Smita, 2004). However, at the same time, a great majority of citizens resist perceived western homogenization (Ondaatjie, 2014). From this perspective, the global knowledge industry (with its affiliation to the West), becomes a particularly interesting context from which to explore how national identity influences individual negotiation of work demands framed as westernized. Furthermore, in collectivist nations such as India (Adya, 2008) and Sri Lanka (Niles, 1998), we might expect individuals to have high propensity to identify themselves in

terms of a shared social identity, such as national identity, significantly influencing the way they negotiate ideal worker expectations. As noted previously, the conclusions of existing work presents a contested picture of the way national identity influences responses to work expectations perceived as westernized (Pal, 2016; Rajahyaksha and Smita, 2004; Srinivas, 2013; Tienari, 2005; Yousfi, 2014; Zhang et al., 2006). In this paper we explore how Sri Lankan employees in knowledge intensive industries are influenced by their national identity when negotiating ideal worker expectations in globalized organizations.

Research Design

To explore how individuals perceived their understanding of a Sri Lankan national identity, and their negotiation of ideal worker expectations, we adopt a narrative approach. Narrative approaches offer insights into the way individuals negotiate, share and contest identities through social interactions (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Boudens, 2005; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Pritchard and Symon, 2011), allowing for the potential of multiple, contradictory social identities interacting when individuals attempt to communicate ‘who I am’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Through this approach we aim to represent people’s stories of their experiences as they understood them, whilst also considering the relationship between individual experience and the wider social context (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Rather than claiming insight into the ‘reality’ of day-to-day experiences within the organizations, we consider employee narratives as socially constructed by the interplay between interpersonal, social and national influences within the wider social context. Through their narratives, we aim to develop a better understanding of the way individuals draw

on subjective meanings of ‘self’, ‘ideal workers’ and ‘national identity’ to construct identities within the context of the interview (Brown and Toyoki, 2013).

The narrative approach lends itself to qualitative inquiry. Our study is based on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 junior managers and 18 graduate management trainees in two globalized organizations. One operated as an IT solutions provider, offering infrastructure and consulting to a multi-national client base. The other organization was a well-known financial services company, serving a global customer base. Both organizational environments were seen as desirable due to opportunities for career development, substantial salary packages, and a perception that the organization was ‘westernized’ and therefore modern. Twenty respondents were men, while 10 were women. Twelve were from the financial services firm, while 18 were from the IT firm. All participants were qualified to graduate level or above (see Table 1 for summary details of respondents).

Insert table 1 here

Data collection

The sampling method can be described as a combination of purposive and convenience based (Silverman, 2009). We gained access to early career respondents by engaging with Human Resources representatives in both organizations, formally approaching the HR departments and explaining our interest in exploring how social identities influenced individuals attempting to negotiate work expectations. The HR departments sent invitations drafted by the research team to the workforce on our

behalf, acting as ‘gatekeepers’, and facilitated the scheduling of interviews with those who expressed interest.

Interviewing is central to narrative research as it encourages participants to subjectively draw on their own feelings, beliefs, opinions and sense of self to contribute to the social construction of the interview (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Semi-structured interviews, based on open-ended questions, were employed to encourage participants to interpret questions subjectively and respond in their own words. In one-to-one interviews, respondents were asked about their work histories, job tasks, working hours, expectations of availability, working patterns (e.g. do they work from home or work flexibly), travel commitments and non-work lives including hobbies, family and leisure pursuits. We then asked them about the importance of work to their sense of self, how they perceive their organization (with regard to its western affiliations), the extent to which they see themselves as part of their organization and characteristics of successful people in their organization. We also asked interviewees about their future career plans, how they balanced their non-work and work commitments, what success in career means to them and their relationships with colleagues and superiors.

In line with the narrative approach, when respondents introduced their own topics into the conversation we paused and reflected with participants about what they said. As a result, the data was (to some extent) analyzed at the same time it was collected. Furthermore, there was a considerable degree of variation among the interviews, with comments sparking unanticipated questions and leading, at times, into lengthy digressions. The flow of the interview (Spradley, 1979) lasted between 1-2 hours,

giving enough time to explore topics until the interviewer and participant mutually felt they had been covered sufficiently. Participants discussed the extent to which they felt ideal worker expectations aligned with their own experiences at work, and with the demands of their non-work life. In the first five interviews national identity emerged as a pertinent theme where a number of respondents discussed the way their Sri Lankan heritage influenced the way they negotiated work expectations. Consequently, for following interviews, we adjusted the interview guide to specifically include questions on how individuals' perception of their national identity influenced them at work. All interviews were digitally audio recorded.

Data analysis

As noted above, data analysis occurred formatively throughout the research process, to guide interview progression, rather than being limited to a summative activity carried out after data collection (Gephart, 2004), a process also described as a common iterative process (Corbin and Strauss, 1994; Locke, 2001). After all interviews had been conducted, we adopted template analysis (King et al., 2004; Silverman, 2016) to analyze respondents' narratives. Our focus was on the 'content' of what was discussed rather than on how it was spoken. In other words, we focused on understanding the 'point' of the narrative over language and form. Further to this, analysis of narratives was situated within the macro organizational and national context, rather than the immediate social context of the interview itself.

First order codes reflected key empirical themes (e.g. long hours, availability, being seen within the organization, requirements to succeed in the organization, life outside work, perceptions of being 'westernized', commitment to organizational expectations,

perceptions of being ‘Sri Lankan’, and how they perceived themselves to be when at work). Following Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1997) notion of ‘progressive focusing’ first-order themes were then grouped into second-order conceptual codes. For instance, the themes ‘availability’, ‘long hours’ and ‘being seen within the organization’ were amalgamated with ‘commitment’ to form ‘ideal worker expectations’. Following this, we considered the relationships between themes, for example how individuals drew on multiple social identities to negotiate ideal worker expectations. Considering how people negotiated these tensions we moved from second order conceptual codes to third order aggregate themes (related to the influence of national identity on individual response to ideal worker expectations), which we report in the findings.

Findings

In this section, we consider individual accounts of three mechanisms used by knowledge intensive global organizations to frame ideal worker expectations: feedback from managers; performance management systems; and western affiliations. Following that, we explore how national identity had a dichotomous influence on individuals’ negotiation of these expectations, encouraging both divergence (by claiming technical excellence and creating a social context to encourage subversion of work demands) and conformity (by fulfilling or challenging expectations associated with their national identity).

Expectations of ‘ideal’ workers

Our findings indicate that in both organizations ‘ideal workers’ were expected to undertake heavy workloads, be readily available to clients even during non-standard hours and be present within the organization. Conformity to these expectations was

encouraged in three key ways. First, feedback mechanisms from managers reinforced organizationally desired ways of working. For example, visibility within the office was praised by managers who saw it as evidence of ‘working hard’ and organizational commitment:

We can easily take clients calls from home or start the day a bit later. But that is not done you see. My manager would ideally like to see me around and if you are seen leaving in the night, they are like ‘oh you’ve had a long day’ in an almost admirable way. It is almost as important as actually working hard (Ieesha)

In many of the interactions described between managers and employees, conveying the impression of conformity to ideal worker expectations was almost more important than the content of the work being done. This was reinforced through a second organizational mechanism of performance management systems, with those who were perceived by others as representing an ideal worker enjoying more career development than those who were not:

When you start off you need to prove yourself, show your dedication to the company – my boss told me this on the first day I started. Many senior people talk about how hard they worked in the beginning and kind of imply that you need to do the same. All the people who have advanced really soon have apparently worked really hard and done the needful. If you don’t put in the hours, and if you are not seen around, your career is not going to accelerate.

Your manager is not going to nominate you for fast track promotion, nominate you for leadership development programs or anything like that (Kanil)

Third, the organization's affiliation to the West encouraged conformity to ideal worker expectations. Employees and managers positioned the organizations as 'westernized', and subsequently more desirable employment contexts than ordinary private sector organizations in Sri Lanka, thereby justifying heavy workloads and performance pressures. Shainaz explains:

We had a one-week induction program when we joined - the grad management program. It introduced us to the modern culture of the organization, featured star performers – you know basically gave us an idea of what the company stands for –innovation and performance. Here they really drilled the idea of being a westernized organization which serves foreign clients, who have higher expectations than local clients.

Shainaz highlights how the perceived modernity of the organization, and superiority of the expectations of western clients, was used to encourage individual compliance with ideal worker expectations, and by default work harder. Indeed, all respondents suggested their managers repeatedly emphasized that fulfilling the expectations of clients in the more economically developed West requires individuals to prioritize work over everything else in their lives:

It is like a broken record that says the same thing over and over again. The developed world is more advanced, we are a selected few people who are

good enough to do analysis for them and we should remember that it is not an easy game to play. They want nothing but the best and we should give them that at any cost – even if it means that we camp in office (Shehan)

Shehan highlights how people are made to feel privileged to be part of the select few individuals who are ‘good enough’ to serve foreign clients, and therefore encouraged to conform to ideal worker expectations, prioritizing their work commitments over non-work demands.

National identity and divergence from ideal worker expectations

National identity contributed to the divergence from ideal worker expectations in two key ways. First, individuals circumvented work demands such as long working hours by drawing on claims of technical excellence, seen as part of their national identity. A high proportion of interviewees suggested they did not need to spend long hours to achieve, or even exceed, their work targets, due to their outstanding technical skills attributed to their Sri Lankan identity. Randika from financial services explains:

I think I am an excellent analyst- most of my friends are excellent analysts.

Sri Lankan people in general are very good with numbers aren't we– our maths is of high standard, even at school level. So I think most people are able to meet their performance targets without too much hassle. They don't need to overwork and put in so much of hours (Randika)

Randika challenges ideal worker expectations of working long hours, meeting performance targets without relinquishing time outside of work. He suggests it is his

Sri Lankan identity which influences his perception that he possesses exceptional technical competence, enabling him to fulfill performance targets without having to overwork. In other words, he drew on a national identity to challenge ideal worker expectations, highlighting that the need to work long hours did not apply to Sri Lankans due to the positive association between their national identity and numerical excellence.

Similarly, Wimal, an IT engineer, talked about how his national identity as a Sri Lankan influenced his ability to fulfill performance targets without overworking, subsequently appearing to comply with ideal worker expectations whilst actually subverting them:

In my case, I am not boasting, I don't need much time to do things – I don't have to work till 8 a clock in the night. Some people might but I don't. I used to do software since I was a child. Actually, this is the story of most of us here. Sri Lankan parents push their children to study from tender age – as a result their brain develops well I think. Intelligence is not inherited, it has to be developed, and we do this for our children. This is why Asian people's technical skills are so good. If you go to America, you'll see that it is the Asian kids who perform best in their SAT's.

In the discussion above, Wimal not only draws on national identity to challenge ideal worker expectations, but also draws on a wider Asian identity to support his claim of Sri Lankan technical expertise and challenge the superiority of 'western' ideal worker expectations. He argues Sri Lankan workers are superior to employees from a

‘western’ background, and are subsequently able to meet organizational performance demands without conforming to the long working hours expected of ideal workers.

The second way national identity contributed to divergence was by shaping the social context in which interactions and relationship building between individuals occurred. The influence of national identity on this social context encouraged the subversion of ideal worker expectations. Jacintha, an analyst from financial services explains:

I work when I want to and I don't when I don't want to. I am not used to rules – nobody in this country is. In our world, rules are always bent. Sometimes I don't even have any work – but I sit at my desk and catch up on a bit of reading for my MBA or something else (Jacintha)

Individuals could subvert ideal worker expectations, for example by doing personal work at their desk, by giving the impression of conforming to the demands encouraged through performance management systems, but actually undermining them. Respondents drew on a Sri Lankan identity to explain this subversion, highlighting how shared understandings of a national identity shaped the immediate social context in which subversion of the ‘rules’ was encouraged.

Significantly, shared understandings of national identity not only influenced how individual workers negotiated ideal worker demands, but also influenced interactions between managers and employees, rendering managers complicit in the subversion of ideal worker expectations. Respondents from both organizations discussed situations in which their managers, who encouraged conformity to ideal worker expectations,

also facilitated the undermining of these same expectations due to shared understandings of the influence of their national identity. Mevan explains:

Rand (his manager) has no problem with what I do or how I do it. We have a good understanding. We go for a cigarette, we watch the matches – he is my buddy. So I have my own way which some people might not have. But then this is part of Sri Lankan culture – if you have the right connections, you are fine. Nothing goes according to the rules in this country so it is not surprising that there are disparities here (Mevan)

A shared social identity, encompassing a shared understanding of the influence of ‘Sri Lankan culture’ encouraged managers’ complicity in subverting ideal worker expectations. Similarly Chandika notes:

I start at 8 sometimes when I am in the mood, but sometimes I come in at 9. It depends. I might work until 8 but I might also be out by 4. The managers are fine. I am a Sri Lankan person, you know, so I build relationships like that - I cooperate with my manager and he cooperates with me. Typical Sri Lankan style if you know what I mean. We do things in our way (Chandika)

Therefore, a shared national identity created a social context which encouraged complicit subversion of ideal worker expectations by individuals and their managers, enabling them to circumvent work demands such as long working hours. Whilst, on the one hand, employees framed ideal worker expectations as

western, and therefore desirable or superior, individuals also drew on their national identity to challenge that same perceived superiority.

National Identity perpetuating ideal worker expectations

National identity perpetuated ideal worker expectations in two significant ways. First, expectations associated with a Sri Lankan national identity, such as making parents proud and providing for family members (Wijayatilake, 2001), encouraged respondents to work hard to progress in their organizations, which involved conforming to ideal worker expectations. Hemish explains:

Success for me is making my family proud. That is the duty and dream of most people in our country. I studied well and I got into this organization, which isn't an easy thing to do. It is one of the leading organizations in Sri Lanka –very competitive, very American style. So they are very proud of me, they talk about me to everyone – bless them. I hope to progress right to the top here – not only for myself but also for my parents.
(Hemish)

Hemish and a number of other respondents talked about how their parents derived a great sense of pride from their children being employed in the modern westernized global knowledge outsourcing industry. Hemish suggests that his desire to make his parents proud through his professional achievements is strongly influenced by expectations he associates with his Sri Lankan national identity. He pinpoints this as a motivation to progress in his organization. Indeed a number other respondents had similar aspirations. As noted in Kanil's statement

previously, progression in the organization involved conformity to ideal worker expectations related to 'being seen' 'and 'managing impressions'. Consequently, the influence of a Sri Lankan national identity encouraged Hemish to comply with ideal worker expectations, in order to make his parents proud. In other words, in this setting of a 'westernized' knowledge intensive organization, a Sri Lankan national identity maintained and reinforced ideal worker expectations.

In another interview, Tiran, a newly wed analyst at the financial services company, discussed how his Sri Lankan identity encouraged him to comply with ideal worker expectations. As a new husband, he felt his national identity influenced him to 'work hard 'and achieve accelerated career progression:

I do it for my family – my wife and the baby we are expecting. Of course we will have more children in the future, so it is important that I progress soon, make more money and I do everything I can to climb up the ladder soon. You do anything and everything for your family and in our society it is the man's duty to provide everything that his family wants, regardless of what his wife does. The pay structures are very good here; you get more money as you rise (Tiran)

In Sri Lankan society, men are considered the providers while women are seen as nurturers (Wijayatilleke, 2001). Tiran and a number of male interviewees suggested that they were strongly influenced by the expectations of their national identity to provide for their family by progressing in the organization, and as such inevitably conformed to ideal worker expectations.

Significantly, a number of female respondents also suggested a desire to progress in the 'well paid' global knowledge work industry to provide for their families. Emphasizing the importance of motherhood, which they associated with a Sri Lankan national identity (Wijayatilake, 2001), these early career women claimed that financial imperatives would enable them to provide luxury items for their children and send them to foreign universities, which might not be affordable with one salary. Even though their children were extremely young, these women talked about needing financial imperatives to fulfill traditional customs of gifting wealth and property to children upon marriage. In order to fulfill these duties, commensurate of a Sri Lankan identity, they argued that they aspired to progress within the organizational hierarchy. Anoushka explains:

My children are my everything – motherhood is the most important thing for any Sri Lankan woman I think. Everything I do is for my children. I work hard to give my children better things. Of course their father works too, but you can never have too much of money in Sri Lanka where the cost of living is so high and we are compelled to send them to universities abroad. Even after they graduate the game is not over, then they will get married and we have to give them something as parents. Even poor people give their children the only house they have when they get married. So when you have a two or three kids – you really need another income. The good thing about this industry is that it pays very well and hard work is rewarded. Your prospects get better as you get senior.

By positioning her work in the knowledge work industry as central to fulfilling her duties as a Sri Lankan mother, Anoushka challenged conventional expectations associated with Sri Lankan women, which limits them to the home environment (Wijayatilake, 2001). In other words, conventional expectations associated with Sri Lankan national identity for women were refined, incorporating work and provision into existing understandings dominated by nurturing and caring. Anoushka makes the point that 'hard work' is rewarded in this industry. Thus, not only did national identity influence the negotiation of ideal worker expectations, but ideal worker expectations and its associated reward structures provided Anoushka a way of negotiating her understanding of her national identity. She drew on ideal worker expectations to incorporate work for women, because it is well rewarded and, as such, necessary to fulfill their duties as mothers, into her national identity. In other words, there appears to be a reciprocal influence between ideal worker expectations and the way individuals negotiate expectations associated with national identity.

The second way national identity perpetuated ideal worker expectations was by encouraging respondents to progress in their organizations in order to *challenge* conventional expectations. A number of our female interviewees noted that, as Sri Lankan women, they felt an increased responsibility to comply with organizational expectations to progress in their career, subsequently inspiring other women. Levanthi explains:

In Sri Lanka women study so hard, go into work but then they take a back step to help husbands to progress. My sister has been in a long-term relationship - the guy is very nice but he wants to married soon and she is

already talking about taking the back step as a woman. I don't know why women in our country feel that they should do this. I don't want her to give up her career. She is cleverer than me. She follows me and my mother says to me that if I make it big, so will all my sisters but if I slow down so will they. So it's my responsibility as a big sister to show them that women have to make it to the top (Levanthi)

Levanthi's aspiration to achieve career success in this globalized knowledge work industry offers her an opportunity to challenge conventional expectations of Sri Lankan women. By conforming to ideal worker expectations she has an opportunity to 'make it big' within a highly desirable working environment, perceived as modern due to its western affiliation, subsequently challenging assumptions that she should take the 'back step' due to her gender. Echoing Anoushka's statement, Levanthi's account similarly illuminates how the negotiation of national identity demands is shaped by ideal worker expectations, illuminating the reciprocal influence between the two constructs.

In sum, national identity had a dichotomous influence on individual negotiation of ideal worker expectations, which were encouraged through performance management systems and their affiliation to the West. First, individuals drew on national identity to diverge from ideal worker expectations by: (a) claiming technical excellence associated with a Sri Lankan identity; and (b) creating a social context through shared understandings of the national identity, encouraging employees and their managers to be complicit in the subversion of work demands. Second, national identity influenced compliance to ideal worker expectations by encouraging individuals to progress

within the organization, to both fulfill and challenge expectations associated with their national identity. Thus Sri Lankan national identity paradoxically both undermined and perpetuated ideal worker expectations in global organizations framed by western claims of superiority, reflecting the contradictory position of non-western nations who are simultaneously attempting to resist what they see as 'western homogenization', whilst also attempting to reap economic benefits from the global market (dominated by western hegemony) (Gramsci et al., 1971). Likewise, ideal worker expectations had a reciprocal influence on how individuals negotiated national identity demands, by either perpetuating or challenging expectations associated with a Sri Lankan national identity.

Discussion

In this article we explored how national identity influenced individual negotiation of ideal worker expectations in globalized, knowledge intensive organizations in Sri Lanka. Based on our findings we make two contributions. First, by showing how a shared national identity significantly influences divergence from, and conformity to, ideal worker expectations in a collectivistic nation, we generalize extant understandings of individual negotiation of ideal worker expectations. Specifically we develop Reid's (2015) model, which is built on individualistic understandings of ideal workers, by adding insights drawn from a more collectivist context where the influence of social identities may be more explicit. Reinforcing previous findings in global knowledge work organizations, employees in the global south were normatively encouraged to conform to ideal worker expectations (Gambles et al., 2006; Green et al., 2008; Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Kreiner et al., 2006; McCann et al., 2008) which managers in the organization framed as 'westernized' (Gagnon and

Collinson, 2014). Claims of superior analytical skills, attributed to their Sri Lankan identity, enabled respondents to appear to conform to ideal worker expectations by meeting or exceeding performance demands, whilst in reality not conforming to the expectation that they work long hours. This is similar to what Reid (2015) refers to as 'passing' behaviors. Whilst previous work notes that perceived western superiority can be challenging to those who identify as non-western nationals (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014; Raghuram, 2013; Srinivas, 2013; Zhang et al., 2006), respondents in this study drew on their national identity to give the appearance of conformity to ideal worker expectations, framed by managers as westernized.

We also identified a further influence of national identity; similar to what Reid (2015) refers to as 'revealing' behaviors. In some interactions with managers, both parties drew on a shared social identity to subvert ideal worker expectations. Based on research conducted in the US, Reid (2015) suggests that revealing deviance from ideal worker expectations to managers results in penalties (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007), implying that employees will appear to conform in their interactions with superiors, only revealing deviance to peers or close mentors. However, in our Sri Lankan empirical context, a shared national identity influenced the immediate social environment, in which deviance from 'rules' was accepted, enabling employees to reveal to managers that they were not conforming to ideal worker expectations, without the threat of being penalized.

Our findings build on Reid's (2015) model by giving further insight into the way a shared social identity might influence the way individuals negotiate work expectations. In doing so, we offer a potential avenue for the model, which is based

on US-centric assumptions, to be developed and generalized beyond the US, making it more applicable in collectivist nations. While we do not imply that all individuals from collectivist nations (Hofstede, 1980) construe themselves in communal terms, or that those from western nations will be individualistic, we agree with scholars that one's identity is more strongly defined in terms of long-lasting group memberships in collectivist nations, and therefore the influence of national identity will be more explicit (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Smith et al., 2011; Wang et al, 2002). Our findings support this argument, highlighting how identification with a national group influenced the way individuals negotiated ideal worker expectations. As such, our findings develop Reid (2015) to offer a more detailed understanding of how individuals negotiate ideal worker expectations, considering the influence of shared social identity to make extant understandings more applicable to organizations outside the individualistic US context.

Our second contribution is to show how ideal worker expectations in globalized knowledge firms influenced the way individuals fulfilled and refined expectations associated with their non-western national identities. For instance, financial rewards, associated with compliance to ideal worker expectations not only enabled female respondents to fulfill traditional duties with regards to their children, but also facilitated re-defining Sri Lankan motherhood to incorporate work and financial provision with extant understandings centering on nurturing (Perera, 1991; Wijayatilake, 2001). Likewise, achieving career progression by conforming to ideal worker expectations enabled them to inspire other women to progress, challenging conventional expectations relating to women in the Sri Lankan context, which relegate women to the private sphere (Wijayatilleke, 2001). This finding, highlighting

how ideal worker expectations can have a potentially reciprocal influence on the negotiation of national identities, has thus far not been considered in existing research.

In the main, it is assumed that non-western identities are challenged in global organizations (Bagger et al., 2008; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Gill and Larson, 2014; Raghuram, 2013), as the local is suppressed in favour of the global (Aihlon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Giddens, 1991). Our findings question these assumptions. Rather than perceiving compliance with ideal worker expectations as challenging to their Sri Lankan identity, individuals suggested conforming to ideal worker demands enabled them to fulfill expectations relating to Sri Lankan national identity, while also refining them in liberating ways. Previous scholarly work highlights how non-western national identities influence ideal worker expectations, leading to divergence (Pal, 2006), perpetuation in the course of resistance (Ailon-Sounday and Kunda, 2003), or adaptation (Yousfi, 2014) of prevailing demands. We go beyond this to highlight the dynamics of reciprocal influence, whereby ideal worker expectations influence how individuals refine expectations associated with their non-western national identity.

Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge that the findings presented were drawn from the Sri Lankan national context, and as such the extent to which they can be generalized to other contexts in the global south should be considered. While we suggest that shared social identities might influence the way individuals negotiate work demands in other collectivistic nations in Asia, we also recognize that national identities in the global south cannot be assumed as homogenous, illustrated in the fact that our findings diverge from other

post-colonial contexts, such as India (Pal, 2016). As such, more work is needed to explore how individuals negotiating ideal worker identities in other collectivist national contexts are influenced by national identity. Similarly, we do not suggest that all western contexts are necessarily individualistic. More work is needed into a wide range of national settings to further refine our understanding of the influences of different nationalistic contexts.

There are a number of limitations encompassed within this paper, which also offer potential areas of research. First, we note that all interviewees were drawn from the same early career stage, which may affect the way they were influenced by their national identity. Early careerists could arguably be seen as a highly agentic cohort (Sturges, 2013) and therefore we might expect them to be more likely to challenge or resist what they see as 'western homogenization', whilst also attempting to reap economic benefits from the global market in response to consumerist desires. Indeed, more research is needed on the influence of social identities on individuals at varying stages of their career, and across the organizational hierarchy. For example, while we noted a potential contradiction between the way managers in this study both encouraged and subverted ideal worker expectations, these findings were drawn from the narratives of subordinates, rather than the managers themselves. How the managers perceived themselves to be influenced by national identity may be different.

Our work offers many avenues for future research. First, we highlight the importance for further examination of how distinctive national identities in more collectivist contexts influence individual negotiation of work demands. For instance, would national identity be able to counteract global market pressures and individual desire

for success in other collectivistic nations. Second, the reciprocal influence between globalized work demands and the negotiation of expectations related to national identity should be considered in other non-western, and western contexts. We have started the debate by providing insights into how Sri Lankan women workers drew on ideal worker demands to negotiate gendered expectations pertaining to their national identity. Although we have not focused on gender specifically in this paper we conceptualize it as another form of social identity, intersecting with national identity, which influences individual responses to ideal worker expectations. Future research should consider how employees in global organizations draw on other social identities to fulfill and refine expectations related to their national identity, in response to work demands. In doing so, future work should aim to develop a more complete conceptual understanding of reciprocal influences on national identities in globalized work contexts.

Conclusions

In this paper we set out to explore how national identity influences individuals' negotiation of ideal worker expectations in globalized, knowledge intensive organizations. Basing our empirical focus on employees in two organizations in Sri Lanka, our work responds to calls for more research into how social identities influence the way individuals respond to work demands (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013), with a particular focus on ideal worker expectations in non-Anglo-American settings (Tiernari et al, 2002). Considering how national identity influenced Sri Lankan employees in globalized organizations, we developed extant conceptual understandings of how individuals negotiate ideal worker expectations (Reid, 2015), making them more applicable to contexts outside individualistic western cultures.

Further to this, we introduced the concept of a reciprocal influence of ideal worker expectations on the negotiation of a non-western national identity, which has not been acknowledged in previous research. In doing so we challenge assumptions that ideal worker expectations in globalized organizations are threatening to non-western national identities (Aihlon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Bagger et al., 2008; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Gill and Larson, 2014; Raghuram, 2013).

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